

Trespass

Marc Neuffer

Virginia, USA

Nick paced back and forth in front of the suite's large windows, pausing to look at his watch.

"Nicolas, stop that. They won't be late. Remember, there's a five and a half-minute transmission delay between their emergence point near Mars orbit and Earth," said Abernathy. "It's begun; they just haven't seen it yet."

"I know, I know. But it's not every day you get a ringside seat to an alien invasion, now, is it?" Nick could never get Dr. Abernathy to use his preferred, more informal name, ever since the foundation's president first interviewed him five years ago. It had been Nicolas then, and it was Nicolas now, as they waited. He was the doctor's handpicked heir-apparent, but Nick wasn't quite settled in that role yet—a heavy yoke. The doctor seemed to shoulder his responsibilities well.

Hands behind his back, Nick thumbed the crystal face of his watch. It wasn't a fancy timepiece, but it was rugged enough to have withstood all the years since he'd earned his bachelors, then masters degrees in sociology and anthropology. While it didn't fit with the two-hundred-dollar haircuts or

three-thousand-dollar suits he was expected to wear when representing the foundation on visits inside the Beltway, it was a reminder of a less complicated time.

“Who do you think will catch the transmission first?” Dr. Abernathy asked.

Nick knew he was idling with that question. It had long ago been set up for the Lovell Radio Telescope in England to be the first. The foundation had funded a grant to a small team of astronomy doctoral candidates for this very occasion. Sometimes the right place, the right time, and the right people were not a coincidence. Neither the Lovell Telescope staff nor the students had forewarning of what would be jumping in their laps in a few minutes.

Of course, some lucky group could be the first, since the invasion communication would be broadcast on a full frequency spread—but it would be a tight focus beam. It was improbable any US-based radio telescopes would pick up anything more definitive than disjointed waves bouncing off the ionosphere.

Nick and Dr. Abernathy had played with the idea of having the small array in the foundation’s Astronomy Research section in Colorado ready to receive but decided it might leave an unwelcome trail back to them. Questions, such as why they had been focusing on that point in empty space on that night, would not benefit the plan.

As scheduled, the pair sat in the upper office of the foundation's building complex. They frequently worked until 10 p.m. on many nights, conducting final top-level reviews of grant requests. Their presence this night would not be suspicious. Dr. Abernathy chuckled to himself while he swirled the glass of soda, ice, and blended Tennessee whiskey. Both occasionally indulged, always mixing the alcohol with a larger percentage of water and ice. Neither was a regular drinker, but consumption in the halls of government and corporate power was expected during lunch and after work in social settings. Of course, no gathering of the powerful was ever strictly social.

"There it is," Nick declared in a voice flatter than he'd intended. They clinked glasses, then began monitoring the astronomy community's internet traffic, passing through electronic dead drops before arriving at the foundation's specialized servers on the top floor.

"If they find out we had anything to do this, we'll be hanged, drawn, and quartered before the sun goes down tomorrow."

"I don't think they hang people in America anymore," said Nick, "but public hanging would impress the masses. They might bring it back just for us."

The first message was a wake-up call. The second would kick off the invasion. They were the only two people on Earth who knew what to expect, who understood what was coming.

Jodrell Bank Observatory, England

Night watch. Simple, boring observation of computer screens to ensure everything functioned correctly, followed by months of data analysis and countless reviews before publishing their findings. The three-student team, led by Dr. Weathers, was lounging in the observation suite of the Lovell Radio Telescope. They had to conduct their allotted three weeks' observations at night, when the dishes could be pointed in the direction of the two galaxies they were observing. One was sliding behind the other, facilitating measurement of the changes in spectral radiation caused by gravitational lensing—and perhaps giving clues to the elusive dark matter.

A loud alarm brought the three students out of their chairs as power graphs jumped on their computer screens. "Overload, overload!" shouted Greg Hanson. "Shut it down, shut it all down!" Oh, my god, he thought. It looked like they'd broken the entire monitoring system. Dr. Weathers was not going to be a happy camper.

As suddenly as the alarms had started, they were silent again. A voice shouted, "Calm down, everyone!" Reg, the staff technician, lowered his hand from the alarm cutoff switch, then strode to the master server's monitor. After a casual look, he announced, "Everything's fine. The system is still up and running normally. Nothing's broken or fried."

“Well, then, what the hell is *that*?” Jennifer asked in a voice above her usual, quiet tone.

Reg looked at the screens, shrugging. “Obviously, it’s a powerful pulse signal on multiple frequencies. But there’s nothing abnormal in the ultra-high or ultra-low bands.” Turning toward the students, he added, “Looks like an artificial source. From my experience, it could be an experimental ground- or air-based military broadband transmission that went wonky, or even a satellite experiencing a cascade failure.”

Reg knew it wasn’t. A sweeping glance at the rows of monitors gave him an ominous feeling. The screens returned to their standard background readouts within a few moments except on one frequency — that one was off the charts.

David suggested they call Dr. Weathers, ask him to come to the observatory. After a three-day student training period, supervising astronomers weren’t required to be on-site with student teams during their shifts.

“Before you do,” Reg interjected, “I suggest you try a little more investigation so you have something factual to report.”

“Okay,” Greg said, “let’s do a full diagnostic sweep first.” The others agreed. It wouldn’t look good for them to say they didn’t understand what had happened . . . and was still happening. After fifteen minutes, all check programs returned

null function reports. The recording processes hadn't glitched either.

"It all looks good," Dave said. "What now?" While considered brilliant, he wasn't a problem solver unless math was involved.

Jennifer jumped in. "Let's refocus the array to find its location." Greg and Reg moved to the control console. Jennifer worked on the frequency monitor, which showed pulses and spikes as she attempted to modulate the signal into something more reasonable for analysis.

"Holy crap!" Greg exclaimed. "It's 56.3278 million kilometers from Earth, very close to the orbit of Mars."

"It can't be," Dave said. "Mars is almost on the other side of the sun from us, and that's a lot further than fifty-six million clicks . . . Wait . . . Oh, Mars *orbit*. Well, then it can't be any of the Mars orbiters."

Jennifer turned away from the frequency analysis console, stating flatly, "It's not any known natural signal. It's non-repeating, in the 150 gigahertz range, but there is an underlying oscillating carrier sine wave at 10 gigahertz. I almost missed it. The amplitude is small but constant. I think we have enough to call Dr. Weathers."

Arecibo Observatory, Puerto Rico

Cathy was up late, enjoying the cooling night air as she sat on the porch of her assigned bungalow overlooking the sleeping town. It was always an enjoyable break in her schedule to come down here twice a year as the National Science Foundation representative to NAIC, the governing body for the 305-meter radio telescope.

Scheduled to fly back to Alexandria, Virginia, she intended to make this trip as much of a vacation as possible for the next three days. Her cell phone broke the calm, dancing across the small table next to her. Cathy glanced at the time: 12:42 a.m. The caller ID showed it was from the NAIC Center just up the slope.

“Dr. Simmons, I think you need to come up here as soon as possible.”

“Is there something wrong, Tom?” Cathy wondered why he was acting so formal. They’d known each other on and off for years, frequently crossing professional paths.

She heard his prolonged breath intake. “Everything’s okay here. In fact, all systems are running at optimum. It’s just that . . . It’s just that—How can I say this? There’s a radio anomaly from Mars orbit, and it’s not from any satellites. Other stations have confirmed receipt of the transmission. We’re linking everyone in. The signal’s origin is over fifty million

kilometers from Earth. NASA will be maneuvering Hubble and Kepler to get a visual.”

“I’m on my way.” Pocketing her phone, she murmured, “This might be an extended stay.”

Goddard Space Flight Center, Greenbelt, Maryland

“Do we have an image yet?” Blake asked for the tenth time. As the night operations manager, he’d been fielding calls from the top dogs at NASA and military general officers. The list on the yellow legal pad in front of him was growing longer. Apparently, *the* call had gone viral. He imagined the Beltway traffic as politicians, staff, and brass scrambled to get in place to be seen as in control of this. He shook his head. There would be no getting ahead of this, not for a while. His assistant rushed in, waving papers.

“We’ve got pictures!”

“Finally. Lock it all down. Nothing goes out without my written permission. Hell, no comments of any kind by anybody. Lock down the facility. All communications go through ops. Take names and requests but nothing outgoing. Now!”

Blake examined the photos. A highly reflective golden sphere and a single paragraph stating the apparent diameter, distance, and optical properties. An attachment had other data

such as albedo, infrared, ultraviolet, gamma, and microwave information. Fanning through the documents, he was startled when his cell phone rang: the director of NASA.

“Blake here, sir.”

The director didn’t miss a beat. “Do you have the images, Blake?”

“Yes, sir, ready to send.”

“Great. Video conference in five minutes. By the way, the president and joint chiefs will be on this one.” Blake paused a moment, then keyed his intercom. “Alan, set up for video conference in Room 203. Double-check the lines are secure.”

White House Situation Room

The president steepled his hands, digesting the material summarized by the on-duty watch team. Glancing around the room, he acknowledged the vice president, national security adviser, secretary of defense, and national science adviser, along with a small need-to-know staff.

“Any photos or signal intelligence yet?” he asked.

The national security adviser glanced up from his secure landline conversation.

“Photos and data coming in now. Telemetry is still being scrubbed to see if there is anything intelligible.”

“Two minutes to video conference,” a watch team officer called out. “Joint chiefs are at the Pentagon except for General Chambers. He’s visiting Cheyenne Mountain and will vidcom from there, Mr. President.”

“Good. Tell him to stay put. We may need him there a while longer.”

President James Fuller wasn’t sure how he wanted to feel about this, though he didn’t let it show. He was well into the first year of his second term. The economy was trending up but not overheated; foreign relations were on the upswing with all allies and a few bigger competitors. Unrest and partisan bickering were dying down as it became widely accepted that social media was half sensationalized journalism and half entertainment, not to be taken seriously. Even the major news media had calmed down once they realized their viewers wanted more facts and fewer talking heads or politicians who never answered the harder, direct questions.

Viewership was up for those outlets that gave full-fact stories and labeled opinions as such. President Fuller had once joked about putting a warning label on every website and social media snippet, like those found on packs of cigarettes. Yesterday, it seemed he would be able to coast through the next three years, implementing most of his American Agenda and World Cooperation programs before he left office. The vice

president would most likely be his replacement. Now, everything could quickly slide into an unfathomable abyss.

Fuller scanned the room.

“Ladies and gentlemen, before we start the conference brief, I want to enact the Continuity of Government protocols immediately after we close here. Get the ball rolling on that now.” He watched as an aide left at a trot. “And let’s ensure we have a full briefing for the key congressional players and cabinet members ready for distribution within thirty minutes. Don’t hold anything back from them. Remind them *all* this has a top classification.” A ten-second countdown started. At zero, the president looked at the camera.

“Okay, folks, let’s roll up our sleeves and get going on this. For those of you doing the briefings, keep it short. File written reports ASAP. We need to be done with this in an hour so I can brief the American public. As you know, some of this has already leaked out. Keep your comments to facts and actionable items. Don’t go deep into the weeds on scientific data or broad-brush speculation.” He looked down at his folder. “First, the NASA folks. Director Whitmore, what do you have?”

Director Whitmore took a moment to regain his composure. He’d thought the military would be asked to lead off.

“Yes, sir, Mr. President. Dr. Blake Thompson has the lead on this. The photos should be available to all of you now.” He gestured off-camera to a split screen showing his staff room and a photo of the orb. Whitmore waved his hand in Blake’s direction. The president made a mental note to replace Whitmore.

“Thank you, Director.” Blake started in. “The object is in a solar orbit approximately the same as Mars. However, it’s pacing Earth, which means its velocity is faster than an object at that distance would be traveling if it were in a true orbit. It’s 99.99 percent reflective in all measurable wavelengths. If it is a sphere, and it appears to be, it’s about twenty-five kilometers in diameter. There are no observable protrusions or divots, or any other structures or markings we can determine. It appears to be completely and perfectly smooth. The structure emits high-energy radio waves at precisely 150 gigahertz with a lower energy static signal at 10 gigahertz.”

Blake tapped his data pad, bringing up graphs to the shared screens. “These are consistent within the frequency bands we use for controlling and communicating with space hardware. We’re working with several centers to record and analyze the signals. The transmissions are rapid, random, and very chaotic, without repetition. Since it’s not in a true orbit, we can’t determine the mass of the object. There’s no visual or radiation evidence of propulsion.”

“Why is that important?” the president asked.

“There must be some energy expenditure to allow it to maintain its curved non-orbital path in a gravity field. That’s all we have now, along with the initial short-term multispectral emissions recorded at Jodrell Banks in England. Those are undergoing analysis.”

“Is there any interference with satellites or ground communications?” General Chambers asked.

“No, sir. It’s transmitting both signals on a gap frequency that space agencies keep clear. Those are discrete gaps we maintain to prevent signal overlaps. Most transmitters compensate with minor frequency shifts when necessary to prevent communication degradation from solar flares or other cosmic sources. And as a side note, all space stations are well shielded, so this won’t be a problem for them.”

“Thank you, Dr. Thompson. Secretary of Defense, you’re up.”

General Connor stood. “Mr. President, the joint chiefs and I have nothing to add to the details provided by NASA. I recommend establishing a continuous communication link with all major powers and jointly going to DEFCON 4 on signals and hardening, and DEFCON 3 on readiness.” He signaled his aide to activate the Defense Department screen. “We’re drafting recommendations for the realignment of some of our force assets. We’d like permission to engage in

discussions with other nations' military leaders on a peer-to-peer basis to prevent any unfortunate incidents." The general read a note handed over his shoulder. "We see two immediate concerns: protecting infrastructure and preventing wholesale panic, which would hamper future operations."

The president arched an eyebrow. "Are you suggesting martial law, General?"

"No, sir. Not at this time, sir."

"Fine. Get Homeland Security on those issues. You have a go on DEFCON and information coordination with other nations' military general staff. Science, you're next."

"Mr. President, it appears we have a first contact event." Dr. Hennesy paused to let that sink in. "This object is not something put up by any nation on Earth. Its construction, composition, and maneuvering abilities are beyond anything we could deploy, even if we had all the money we wanted. The fact that it's transmitting in the clear on our gap frequencies tells me they have a lot of data on us, while we know next to nothing about them." He tapped a binder. "There is a protocol, but it's outdated. Last revision was in 1983. Absent a major military attack. I suggest we gather a small focus group to develop guidance, options, and recommendations. I have some ideas, but I would like to bring in some NGOs to help keep an even strain on the effort. A think tank, if you will, that won't be strangled or hampered by bureaucracy and compartmentalized

thinking. Sir, the best minds for this are not in the government. This is a big bag of we don't know what we don't know."

"Thanks for the straight shot, Arnie. You have my go on that. Does anyone else have new data or actionable information? No? I'm making Vice President Scalon the point man for all civilian efforts." He glanced around the room for comments. "Okay, we are adjourned."

The president signaled his VP and national security adviser to stay seated. They leaned in as other staff moved out. "You two come upstairs with me. I don't like to drink alone. Help me flesh out the standard my-fellow-Americans speech."

Foundation HQ, Virginia

"Well, the last fifteen years of preparation have paid off, for the most part," said Dr. Abernathy. "Can you imagine what would happen if we hadn't laid the groundwork for this?" It was more of a statement than a real question.

Nick replied, "After the first two days, things went a lot smoother than I'd hoped. Having the right people in place doing the right things moved events along quite nicely."

Neither man addressed some of the less-than-gentlemanly actions they'd prepared, staged, and were ready to do to keep a lid on radicals and opportunists. Luckily,

there'd been no need for a full-throttle thrust to marginalize or sideline many of them.

"I'm somewhat surprised most of the militant religious factions were restrained in their theological saber-rattling by their more pragmatic brothers," mused Dr. Abernathy. "Money well spent." He looked up at the ceiling. "I think we're ready for phase two."

Nick raised a finger in the air. "Here's to us not going down in history."

Cheyenne Mountain

"Get SecDef and the president on the horn," General Chambers ordered as he glanced at the ten-foot-tall main situation board above the operation theater.

"SecDef online, sir. Holding for the president."

"Very good," Chambers responded. "Record all this for the joint chiefs." He'd been buried inside the mountain for two weeks and was ready to see some sunshine.

A colonel pointed at him, and he began. "Mr. President, Mr. Secretary, there's been a status change. One minute ago, the random transmission changed to an orderly signal, which appears like the handshake protocols used between networked computers. We are now receiving a multifrequency broadcast in every national language I can think of. It's all plain text. Yes,

sir, the text is repeated over and over. It says, *We will speak to all major world political leaders in sixty minutes, at 2 p.m. GMT.* Yes, sir, that's all. It just keeps repeating."

White House Situation Room

All eyes were on the countdown clock. The watch team staff stood by to link in any radio frequencies that might be needed. As the clock approached zero, a secure landline on the center desk buzzed quietly. "Someone answer that," the vice president said flatly.

The secretary of defense picked up the handset, ready to rip off the head of whoever was on the other end. He listened for five seconds before turning to the president. "It's them, sir."

"Them? Oh! Put it on speaker." He took a long breath, and then calmly said, "This is the president of the United States. Who am I speaking with?"

"Good morning, Mr. President. You are communicating with Coordinator 317. We will be leaving your system shortly, having objectives to meet elsewhere. Our return will be in 197 lunar cycles to discuss terms of surrender. This message is being communicated to all Earth's national leaders. But, as an aside, we are quite taken by your nation's Marshall Plan for assisting allies and enemies alike after the last major war on

your planet. It was an excellent move. Yours is a fascinating history. Goodbye, until we return.”

No one stirred until the president spoke. “Well, that was abrupt, concise, and right to the point. No ambiguity there. Anyone have a calculator?”

“One hundred and ninety-seven months—a smidgen over fifteen years,” a voice from the back stated quietly.

The defense secretary commented, “Sir, there was no light-speed delay in their conversation with you.”

An aide slid up his hand. “Sir, we have SigInt from NSA that the audio we heard was a blend of three different national newscasters’ voices. No breath noises or pauses. No background noises. Probably computer-generated.”

The president was tempted to add that he’d always suspected the press were aliens, but he kept himself in check. Everyone in the room seemed to be waiting for the next shoe to drop, and it did.

“Sir, they appear to be gone. Blinked out. No trail of any kind,” the defense secretary announced, still holding the phone connected to Cheyenne Mountain.

“So, who else did they speak to?” asked the president.

The SigInt watch team officer spoke up. “In a nutshell, sir, everybody. Our first look shows every European country and Turkey, India, Pakistan, Russia, China, Canada. Mexico,

Brazil, Cuba, and most of the South American countries. Israel, Egypt, the Saudis, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Syria.” He looked at the printout and continued, “Almost everybody. The message was the same for everyone except the last part about the Marshall Plan. That was only for us.”

Chief of Staff Rayburn muttered, “Looks like we need some long-range planning.”

Preparations – Year One

It took six months, but once Russia, the US, and China issued a detailed joint declaration, the rest of the world got on board. There had been some forced removal of a few petty dictators by their populations. Surprisingly, almost everyone accepted there was no time to argue about whose end of the boat was leaking.

Contingency plans and strategies emerged to cover the full spectrum from capitulation to total resistance. Technological advancement seemed to be spring-loaded to make long strides in the coming years. Arrangements for population dispersal and long-term shelter construction were ready to be implemented. Worldwide, all significant military forces were cooperating and undergoing inter-service and international coordination exercises. Nations with starving populations were moving out of that shadow. It was well known the world produced an abundance of food.

However, brushfire wars and corrupt government leaders threw up distribution hurdles. Logistic experts from Amazon, FedEx, and UPS created a consolidated up-to-the-minute worldwide tracking and shipping system. These improvements in efficiency and reduction of duplicate efforts saved billions of dollars and hundreds of thousands of lives. Nobody was hungry anymore. Everyone on the planet had a stake and a job in this gargantuan effort.

The foundation was represented by its grantees in every top-level planning and analysis cabal. Over the years, they'd earned a top ranking internationally, in almost every area of expertise, through research support, think tanks, policy and analysis structures, and technology. Unknown to everyone, this had been in preparation to ensure they were positioned to steer governments' responses and social vectors.

For the last ten years, the foundation's technical section had triggered numerous advances in computer sciences, security, and aerospace through backdoor channels into corporations and governments, using gentle nudges, questions, and the blatant injection of data into computer files. Having an advanced alien AI at their disposal made that a simple task. There was not a computer network or communication system they couldn't read and manipulate.

Year Eight

General Watson looked over the organizational chart for the United Earth Space Force. Still in its infancy, they had the workforce but not much in the way of equipment. Certainly nothing that flew. That was soon to change. The leaps in material engineering, physics, power systems, and computers had pushed the envelope so far outward it was time to stop implementing design changes for every small improvement. The first hundred space-capable fighters had begun rolling out of Boeing, SpaceX, and aerospace facilities in Russia, China, Canada, India, and Germany. Even Brazil had propped up systems and weapons manufacturing facilities.

Tens of thousands of ultra-small stealth surveillance satellites were outside Earth's gravity well and on their way to station-keeping points from Mars's orbit inward. They were designed as monitoring stations but could also be tasked as hyper-fast kinetic impactors. The general marveled at the control systems. If those brainiacs hadn't created true artificial intelligence capabilities in those small packages, they had gotten damn close. Soon there would be hundreds of thousands of them, if not millions, to greet those alien bastards. World opinion was like patriotism on steroids and running red-hot with can-do spirit. He hoped that tank wouldn't too soon run dry.

Year Ten

National Security Adviser, Robin Johnson, entered the Oval Office at the appointed time. She'd been the president's defense adviser when he'd served as vice president. President Jim Scalon was cut from the same cloth as Fuller. He was a no-nonsense, practical, and pragmatic leader.

"Okay, Robin, what's on our plate today?" Cuts right to the chase, thought Robin. No hello, how are you doing? But his genuinely warm smile was compensation for what might otherwise appear as an abrupt manner. Well, she thought, we are getting close to X-Day. The press had coined that term early on, maintaining a daily countdown since the aliens left.

Robin opened her folder as she slid into a burgundy club chair. "Routine project summaries, slight international squabbles, and some analysis from the A-Squad." That was what the former president had labeled the non-government think tanks created to develop scenarios involving the aliens' initial visit. Early on, they'd been instrumental in pointing toward successful paths in almost every discipline engaged in operations for dealing with the aliens' return. A few positions had changed, but most of the squad members remained on board.

"So, overall, all things are trending up and on time?" inquired Scalon.

“Yes, sir. A few minor glitches, but they seem to resolve almost as soon as they appear.”

“Okay, leave the briefing folder. Now give me your gut analysis.”

“Well, sir, it’s something we briefly touched on in the past. There’s no obvious single answer when we look. Technical problems, adverse manufacturing conditions, and bottlenecks are being solved by cross talk between groups, or some young engineer has an epiphany that provides an unconventional solution. It’s like someone is out ahead of us playing a perfect game of Whac-A-Mole.”

The president leaned forward, resting his forearms on his thighs. He seemed to brighten, turning his head toward Robin. “Well, we don’t want to look a gift horse in the mouth. But keep me informed if you get even a sniff of anything improper.”

Knowing it was her cue the briefing was over, she rose from her chair. “I’ll quietly get some ears to the ground, sir.”

After she left, Scalon buzzed his secretary. “Susan, set up a one-on-one meeting with Colonel Thomas for me. Tell him I have a horse I want him to look at.”

The Foundation, Virginia

Both men reached up, removed earpieces. “Well, it looks like we may need to run more counterintelligence ops. The hounds will be sniffing around soon,” said Dr. Abernathy.

Nick Sanders leaned back in his chair. “Perhaps we should let them find a little something in a way we can control and distance ourselves from.”

Two Months Later—The White House

Air Force Colonel Thomas, in civilian clothes, stood looking out the window of the Oval Office, turning as he heard the president enter.

“So, what has my favorite spook unearthed?”

“Quite a bit and not so much, actually. The foundation is profoundly embedded in all scientific, technological, and social activities of the project. But they were engaged in those sorts of activities well before the arrival event. About fifteen years before, in fact.”

“They’ve done some excellent work for every major federal department and some friendly foreign governments. Crossed all the *Ts* and dotted all the *Is*.” Scalon nodded.

“Aside from their involvement in the A-Squads, they’ve limited activities to assisting corporations and research groups.

It took some digging, but I found numerous indications of previous administrations using one of their sections for some intelligence work. They've stayed to the right side of outright espionage. Just some fact-gathering and pattern analysis. I had to dig for that, because the government did the hiding, not the foundation."

Colonel Thomas drew a slim folder from his briefcase, broke the seal, and flipped a few pages before continuing. "They have a long history of making grants to individual scientists and small technology companies, some foreign but most domestic. After the arrival event, they had the reputation, connections, and people with the right skill sets to jump in with both feet."

The president paced as he listened to the report. "So, no bad apples. The barrel is sound and on our side?"

"Yes. In fact, I found some NSA recordings of them talking very positively about President Fuller's American Agenda and World Cooperation programs at several bigwig conferences. Nothing bombastic or overt, simply casual agreement when asked."

"Ah, yes. The NSA, the snake in the garden we hate but need," Scalon murmured.

Year Thirteen

“Charlie Leader to Charlie Flight. One more sweep and then match vector with Mother 27 for fuel pods by the numbers.” Lieutenant Jake Bohannon loved his Sapphire Space Fighter. The only drawback was the full oxygenated liquid immersion and trilateral compression suit that allowed for 40 G acceleration without having your eyeballs smushed to a paste. After launch from an orbital hanger, flight time to the moon from Earth orbit was under half an hour with enough fuel left to put up an extended offensive fight.

His onboard AI was a finely tuned joystick with a personality. When the engineers and computer techs first inserted them in the fighters a few years back, they discovered a slight amount of separation anxiety in both the pilots and the AIs. The solution was to have pilots wear an ear- and eyepiece linkup with their AIs when away from their ships. In two more years, Jake thought, just before X-Day, he’d probably be a major, controlling a squadron of three flight wings.

Like every other fighter craft, his complement had fifteen fire-and-forget kinetic impact drones and eight laser-pumped gamma class missiles. Those babies could cook a goose through thirty inches of hardened steel after a proximity trip or before an impending enemy knockout. Through the pilots’ gossip line, he’d heard some eggheads were concocting a means to harness dark energy as a weapon.

A necessary consensus had been reached. Earth focused on fast, small attack fighters versus larger and more vulnerable fixed defensive structures in space. Behemoth space-based battleships proved to be a nonstarter in every war game scenario. The only tip of the hat to fixed position offensives or defensive weaponry were the thirty-seven massive laser emplacements spread out and hidden on the moon. Mars emplacements had been considered, but there was no guarantee that the planet would be in a tactical orbital position when the time came.

AIs operated the moon-based weapons since human operators would require supporting environmental infrastructures. Emissions leaking from a large complex might give away their locations. The moon units stayed powered down to a trickle, set to power up when unleashed by Command.

Out past the orbit of Mars, autonomous railgun weapons systems were peppered throughout the asteroid belt. Small maneuvering thrusters were used to pivot and adjust the firing angle of the rock-mounted guns. While they were single-shot systems, each one would pump out a spread of over two hundred thousand hardened steel pellets into the projected path of enemy craft. Each bullet had enough kinetic energy to punch a ten-meter impact crater on the moon or in the side of an alien ship. Even if they missed, they might cause the alien

spaceships to change to vectors more favorable to Earth Space Forces.

The White House

President Scalon marveled that he was still president. A one-time exception had been approved by congress and ratified by all fifty states three years ago to modify the Twenty-Second Amendment to the US Constitution, the one that prevented anyone from serving more than two terms as president. He'd been marginally amazed at how fast that had gone through. It seemed nobody wanted to change horses right before a battle. After X-Day, he would either serve out two more years or be dead horse meat.

National Science Adviser William Schrift was due in at any moment with what he'd said was important news. Scalon hoped it would be good news. He was tired and needed a pickup. Schrift entered the Oval Office accompanied by the national security adviser. To the president, they both seem a lot more relaxed than they had any right to be.

“Okay. Give me the news.”

“Mr. President, one of the A-Squad teams was reviewing the contact events, starting with the first transmissions and interactions. We had dissected each one separately, but a young electronic warfare member suggested examining the

transmission as a single group. I'm not sure if you remember, but the initial signal had a low power carrier wave, and the last two exhibited a handshake protocol before and after each broadcast." Schrift took a breath and explained, "Sir, we may have a way to hack their computers, or whatever they use as computers."

"And?" Scalon asked.

"Mr. President, we're going to build devices into every space fighter and put a few hundred stronger ones in Earth and Mars orbits. We're retrofitting all the AIs for control of these units. We hope to scramble their electronic brains with handshake feedback loops."

The president turned to his national security adviser. "Okay, Robin, why are you tagging along on this one?"

"Well, Mr. President, using our most advanced AI, we took another scrub on the carrier wave that accompanied the audible message. There was another text message embedded. It said, 'Your choice.' We haven't a clue what that means, except perhaps we should revisit and revise the wording in Option A."

"Revisit and revise?" he repeated. "In what way?"

"Well, coupling the reference made by the aliens to the Marshall Plan, which only we received, with the newly discovered text message, I think we should make the Option A wording more of a bilateral agreement, sort of a win-win

proposal, instead of a less-than-harsh conditional surrender. Change the Option A proposal so we become something more like trading partners, perhaps. We can still fall back on the original Option A if we need to. This would give us a little more cushion for dialogue before we need to decide whether to implement Strike Plan Z. The think tank team likes this approach, in light of the new message.”

The president looked at Robin, searching for any sign of doubt, and seeing none. “Do you think they were testing us?”

“Yes, sir, I think they were.”

X-Day—Command and Control Facility

The president, advisers, and department representatives were in their second week on location, in lockdown. Other government officials and staff were scattered throughout Space Command at six redundant hardened facilities around the world. Civilian populations had been moved to pre-staged assigned locations, as had military units. The National Guard patrolled every empty city.

“Contact, sir. Three of their craft are in the Mars orbit shell.”

“Let’s make a deal,” the president murmured. “Start the broadcast.”

The same transmission beamed out from every nation in the world simultaneously with the same wording:

“We would like to know your intentions. We also want you to know we are prepared to defend our home system.”

After a ten-second delay, the alien voice replied, “Have you prepared terms of surrender?”

The president paused, then asked, “Are you speaking with all world leaders?”

“No, Mr. President. All of them are listening, but we are conversing only with you as our point of contact. Not your nation, just you. Have you prepared terms of surrender?”

Control operatives in the pit were in whispered conversations with their counterparts in other countries. Single-point contact had been one of many possibilities put forward. Within a minute, the tote board filled with green up arrows. There were three red down arrows from outlier nations.

“Yes, we have prepared a document approved by all world leaders. Do you wish us to transmit it to you, or will you be arriving on the planet for a formal meeting?”

“Please transmit.”

The president nodded to his communications director. “Send it.”

“Transmitting, Mr. President. Sir, we expect there to be about at least ten minutes before we receive a reply as they review the document.”

In less than thirty seconds, however, the alien replied, “We have received and reviewed your terms and have made some suggested changes. Please review and reply as to acceptance of the revised terms.”

An AI was standing by to receive and analyze any reply from the aliens. Ten seconds later, the AI reported the only change was to strike out the provision for an exchange of ambassadors.

“Let me see a paper copy of both, please.”

With SecDef and the national security adviser doing the same thing, the president reviewed the original and the amended copies side by side. Reports of other nations doing the same review were shared on the command net. After five minutes, and with the approval of all major and most minor countries, the president transmitted his response. “We see you have removed only the section on ambassador exchanges. Is that correct, no other changes?”

“That is correct, Mr. President. Your people would not survive on our planet, and we could not survive on yours, so the point is moot.”

The president took a deep breath, squared his shoulders, brought his chin up, and said, “Well, it appears we have an agreement.”

“Affirmative,” replied the alien representative. “One last declaration remains.” After a slight pause, the voice continued. “Let it be recorded, per the agreement exchanged, and as represented in fact and in purpose, we surrender to the president of the United States of America.”

Silence reigned, then was broken by quiet chatter and outgoing comms. The secretary of defense looked stunned. “Did I have a stroke, or did they just surrender to us?”

Not missing a beat, the president pressed the transmit button. “As president of the United States and on behalf of Earth, I accept your surrender.”

The national science adviser slid a piece of paper to the president. “Ask them what they want to exchange,” was written in large, looping cursive.

Before the president responded, the alien voice said, “As part of the agreement, we would like to offer technical information in several scientific areas such as quantum physics, astrophysics, engineering, chemistry, and life sciences. We are prepared to download information to approved servers and data banks.”

The president mentally rolled the dice and replied, “Well, that seems like a nice start. What would you like that we might provide in exchange?”

The alien's voice replied, "We are especially interested in your arts—specifically, music, humor, and fiction genres. Many of the species we trade with will find them most enjoyable. Think of us as information brokers."

President Scalon rubbed his temples. "Well, you can look inside all but the most hardened computer systems. You could take all that and more if you wanted."

"Yes," was the reply, "but that would be stealing and would ruin our reputation with other species."

"Give me a minute, please," the president said. He leaned over to his national science adviser and whispered, "Get them an Amazon account, and make it Prime. And Netflix too." Grinning, he added, "Put it on your card, Bill."